

SGI 29 York Watergate

York Watergate, Victoria Embankment Gardens (at the bottom of Buckingham Street)

Grid Ref: TQ 303 804

York Watergate: gateway to the Strand from the Thames, 1626

The Watergate was built in 1626 and often appears in paintings. The paintings show how the levels in the Thames have fluctuated and provide useful historical evidence about London's river. Now it is marooned at the back of Victoria Embankment Gardens but in former times was an important access from the Strand to the Thames. A Canaletto painting of 1746-7 shows a busy set of stairs and, beneath the platform area, a clear arch with water flowing through it. In 1750 Labelye (the designer of Westminster Bridge) stated "it is well known that the bed of the River Thames (above London Bridge especially) is several inches higher than it was 100 years ago". By the 1800 Daniel Turner painting this arch has been buried in Thames mud. The new London Bridge was built, and the old one removed, between 1824 and 1834. After that the much greater river flows through it produced rather higher high tides and much lower low tides with severe erosion of Westminster Bridge piers and other structures. A long floating Hungerford Pier was also built in 1833. As a result an 1842 painting shows a wide reedy marsh below the Watergate. An 1856 survey of the river showed channel bed levels on this reach of the Thames 2 – 3 m lower than they had been in 1823 in the days of the old London Bridge.

Just to the north of the Watergate, at the bottom of Buckingham Street was the house forming the left side (as looking at the picture) of Turner's 1800 painting lived in by William Smith from 1804 to 1819 (see SGI 30). He probably chose it because of its convenient access to boats on the river. In Smith's time the tidal range on the Thames here was only 2.5 – 3.5 m (in contrast to the modern 4.5 – 6.5 m).



The Victoria Embankment was built between 1864 and 1870. This was a major undertaking by Joseph Bazalgette who was also responsible for the Victorian sewage system that transports London's waste to Becton on the north side of the Thames and Crossness on the south side. Both came about as a result of 'The Great Stink' during the summer of 1858 when MPs in the House of Commons were badly affected by the stench.

Behind the Embankment walls a new road was built with wide pavements and behind that gardens were created. The District and Circle Line Underground Trains run underneath the gardens. When designing the Victoria Embankment Gardens the York Watergate was incorporated with steps leading up to Buckingham Street. The Watergate is now some 75 m back from the Thames which was made narrower and deeper.

The Watergate was cleaned and repaired and later a plaque was added that tells us that it was Nicholas Stone who built it in 1626. It is one of the very earliest buildings constructed from Portland Stone. Wren used this stone when rebuilding London's churches after the Great Fire of 1666 and it has remained a popular choice for London buildings ever since. It is a Jurassic limestone which is quarried on the Island of Portland, off Weymouth, where it could be easily loaded on to ships and transported up the Thames to London. These days it is mined. The earliest recorded building in London to use this stone was the Banqueting House in Whitehall, built by Inigo Jones in 1622.

It is appropriate that Embankment Pier is situated on the Thames beneath the Watergate and walking up Villiers Street on the west of the gardens you are climbing up the original banks of the Thames to the Strand at the top.

Access

There are several entrances to Victoria Embankment Gardens but the most convenient one is from Villiers Street, close to Embankment Underground Station. It is situated beyond the Bandstand on the left hand side.



Painting by Canaletto c.1750 showing the steep steps to the Thames with the water tower behind



The York Watergate and The Adelphi
Daniel Turner, approx. 1800



The York Watergate today
Photo: D. Clements 2014

References

Painting by Canaletto c.1750, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Canaletto -
The City of Westminster from Near the York Water Gate - Google Art Project.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Canaletto_-_The_City_of_Westminster_from_Near_the_York_Water_Gate_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)

Painting by Daniel Turner c.1800, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/file:daniel turner - York Water-
Gate and Adelphi - Googler Art Project.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/file:daniel_turner_-_York_Water-Gate_and_Adelphi_-_Googler_Art_Project.jpg)